

A BYU Jazz Voice
A speech by Alexis Munoa
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In a small ballroom of the Hilton in New York City there was silence. You know that kind of silence. The moment before the applause. The moment when the audience holds their breath, before they exhale and remember the patterned carpet below their feet, and the non-obtrusive yet glittering chandeliers above their heads.

In January of this year, BYU's Jazz Voices performed at the International Association for Jazz Education's annual conference. We were one of ten collegiate jazz choirs selected nation-wide to be showcased at IAJE. Jazz Artists, educators, arrangers, composers and fans crowded into the New York Hilton and Sheraton. We were walking distance from Times Square and a metro ride from Harlem. It was really a dream come true for the choir members and our director, the lovely Kelly Eisenhower. Following a program as thick as the BYU Fall class catalogue, attendees could choose from workshops, performances, lectures, exhibitions, films, discussions, panels, and interviews all about jazz. We slept jazz, breathed jazz, and I think Andrew told me he ate some jazz cheerios for breakfast. (I doubt they needed any extra sugar if ya know what I'm sayin')

In one short weekend I was privileged enough to meet drummer Matt Wilson, see the Clayton Brothers quintet, hear bassist John Patitucci and be inspired by many more. I also was present at an interview with free jazz innovator Ornette Coleman. The choir members were able to attend clinics on improvisation, musical technique and lyric interpretation and expression. Someone who set the bar for jazz singers was Joe Williams. He had *it*; A confidence in his music and a soul as deep

as the ocean. I was moved as I sat in the dark, watching film documentary on his life.

At the Late Night Vocal Jam session, Brittany, Whitney and I screamed in delight, right along with the rest of the crowd, when a shy, 17 year-old girl took the audience by surprise. She busted out the most swinging down and dirty (that is a good thing in jazz) rendition of Nat Cole's "Straighten UP and Fly right". People were standing on their chairs cheering for her. I don't know if I have ever heard so much soul come out of anyone.

This year at IAJE, Utah took the conference by surprise. Not only did BYU Jazz Voices perform, but our director, Kelly Eisenhower, was a featured solo artist. She wowed the crowd with her soulful voice and sassy styling. Renowned Tenor Saxophone player Bob Mintzer backed her up live at her performance and was featured on her album. Members of the BYU Jazz Faculty also performed in her band. The Crescent Super Band, from The Music School in Alpine, Utah, was the opening act for the entire conference and played two concerts of their own.

Jazz from Utah? Who'da thunk? What is it that draws us to this music? What is it that makes accounting majors, history majors and little girls from San Diego spend 7 plus hours a week in jazz choir?

Wynton Marsalis, jazz trumpeter, and the only man to win Grammys in both jazz and classical music, said the following

"As long as there is democracy, there will be people wanting to play jazz because nothing else will ever so perfectly capture the democratic process in sound. Jazz means working things out musically with other people. You have to listen to other musicians and play with them even if

you don't agree with what they're playing. It teaches you the very opposite of racism and anti-Semitism. It teaches you that the world is big enough to accommodate us all."

The freedom that comes in playing jazz allows the players and the audience to cry, to hurt, and to laugh and to rejoice together.

Jazz is a conversation. Each day we improvise speech. There are clearly defined rules. We follow the rules of grammar without thinking about them. Without the constraints of language we would not be able to communicate effectively. It is the same in Jazz. We don't write out the exact words we will use with our roommates, when we walk in the door after a less than fantastic date. We speak our hearts to them. That is the freedom that jazz allows. The player, the vocalist, and yes, even the drummer, use the chords, the melody, the rhythm to communicate to the audience. And we jazzers love it when the audience communicates right back at us. We love the mm hm or the occasional whistle. Applause is nice too. Jazz music involves all. I feel it connects us as human beings all going through the same things. We all have had heart ache. We all have had joy. We all have experienced some form of love.

Last summer I was blessed with the opportunity to tour Spain and Portugal with Synthesis. Every night I felt the power of this music take a firm grip on the audience. A year before, I had felt a little lost musically. I loved music so much, but had never found a place in music where I felt I could truly express myself and be fulfilled. Then a sweet old, piano playin' man named Bob Bailey took me under his wing. In one summer I fell in love with Lester Young, Benny Goodman, Antonio Carlos Jobim, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Ella

Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday and John Coltrane all at once.

The music took over my whole soul, and I saw it happen to each audience we played for. It happened one night in Ezcaray a small ski town perched in the mountains of Spain. It happened again at the San Sebastian Jazz Festival in the Basque country. Imagine 1600 Spaniards all clapping on two and four! Ok maybe not all of them, but they were trying! Again the music overpowered me in a small jazz club on our New York trip. We got shown real New York hospitality, when Tenor player Houston Person let a few of us get into his show for 10 bucks instead of 25. We sat in the Lennox Lounge for all three sets. He swung so hard that I think my heartbeat started swinging too. And the phenomenon occurred again in that small ballroom of the New York Hilton. The lights were bright. The room was full. We started to sing a song that was close to our hearts. We were nervous, but we sang. The words "Though hard to you this journey may appear" came out of my mouth. I thought about the people in the chairs in front of me. I thought about how easy I have it. I know who I am. I know where I am going. Did they? What had they gone through? What were their stories? Then came the words, "grace shall be as your day." I felt like I was going to burst with light. I think they felt it too. This was a song of hope! Something us humans could use once in a while. We finished and it happened. That silence. The pause in time where both the audience and the performers understand each other.

Jazz has that power.

The late great John Coltrane said the following, "My music is the spiritual expression of what I am — my faith, my knowledge, my being ... When you begin to see the possibilities of music, you desire to

do something really good for people, to help humanity free itself from its hang-ups ... I want to speak to their souls. ”

I am so grateful for Jazz here at BYU. I know my fellow choir members and jazz students feel the same. Once the love for jazz is planted in your soul, you won't ever want to the sorry life you had before that! I am thankful for the unbelievable opportunities that have come through the jazz program here. Thank you all for inviting us here to share our love of this music with you.